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ABSTRACT

The study observed and compared the pragmatic skills of two mildly retarded and two nonhandicapped kindergarten children, focusing on their use of language in everyday conversational situations. A checklist developed by the investigator was used to record observations based on six categories of speech acts: commenting, answering, affirming, denying, directives, and other. Children were observed in their classrooms during free play and while engaged in both large and small group activities. Marked differences in pragmatic language skills of the two groups were observed. The nonhandicapped children used more speech acts that gave control and direction to their conversation. By contrast, speech acts of the mildly retarded children were generally reactive in nature, characterized by high rates of answering, affirming, and denying. Differences in types of directives were noted: nonhandicapped children used questions, while the handicapped children used short and repetitive imperatives. Type of activity also led to observed differences. The handicapped children were observed to be more comfortable speaking in settings which gave structure to their conversation, while the nonhandicapped children appeared to be more at ease talking in loosely structured activities. (Author/JW)

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A Study of Pragmatic Skill Development in Two Groups Of Young Children: Mildly Retarded and Non-Handicapped

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Running head: Pragmatic Skill Development

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare the pragmatic skills of two groups of young children: mildly retarded and non-handicapped. This was carried out by means of a checklist developed by the investigator specifically for this study. Subjects for this study were four kindergarten-aged children. Two of the children had been diagnosed as mildly retarded. The remaining two children were in a regular kindergarten classroom. The children were observed in their classroom during free play and while engaged in both large and small group activities.

Marked differences in pragmatic language skills of the two groups of students were observed. The non-handicapped children used more speech acts that gave control and direction to their conversation than did the children who were handicapped. The type of activity in which the children were engaged also lead to observed differences between the two groups. The children with handicaps seemed to be more comfortable speaking in settings which gave structure to their conversation. The non-handicapped children appeared to be more at ease talking in loosely-structured activities.

An area of language that is fast becoming a prime field of investigative research is pragmatics. Pragmatics refers to an individual's ability to use his/her language in everyday conversational situations. Most young children seem able to effectively use their language skills with relative ease. However, for some youngsters, this is not the case. Of particular concern are children who are mildly retarded. While frequently mainstreamed into regular programs, these children often do not seem to fit in with their peers. Many times a key factor in this situation is these children's lack of ability to communicate appropriately with adults and peers. While educators have noted this problem, only a limited amount of research has addressed the pragmatic skills of young children who are mildly retarded.

In a longitudinal study, Oller, Thorp, and Coleman (1984) studied speech act production by children who were normal and mentally retarded. Over a period of 23-25 play sessions, language was sampled and recorded for all subjects. In addition to a functional speech act analysis of the language samples, the researchers carried out syntactic and semantic analyses. Their results indicated that while the children were similar from a syntactic and semantic point of view, they showed significant differences in how they performed specific speech acts. The nonhandicapped youngsters used a higher proportion of more sophisticated speech act strategies such as indirect requests than did the children who were retarded.

Greenwald and Leonard (1979) investigated the communicative

competence of normal children and children with Down Syndrome by observing how they performed on the Uzgiris-Hunt Ordinal Scales of Psychological Development (Uzgiris & Hunt, 1975). The researchers had classified certain tasks on this test as performative or declarative, a basic distinction between pragmatic skills. The results showed that while both groups performed comparably on performative tasks the non-handicapped children did better on declarative tasks.

This present study was conducted in an effort to gain more information about the pragmatic skills of young children who are mildly retarded. It compares the pragmatic skills of young children who are mildly retarded to those of same-aged peers. A pragmatic checklist was specifically designed for this study. This checklist includes all previously identified areas of speech act production and breaks each category down with sufficient detail to pick up subcategory differences. A major reason for the use of this checklist is that is was designed to be appropriate for the age of population under study.

Method

Subjects

The subjects for this study were four kindergarten-aged children; two males and two females. Two of the children had been diagnosed as mildly retarded and were receiving instruction in a special education classroom. The remaining two children were in a regular kindergarten classroom. The two groups of children were matched on both age and sex. The girls averaged 75.5 months of age while the boys averaged 70 months old.

Instrument

A pragmatic skill checklist was developed by the author to record data about the language of the children with handicaps and the non-handicapped children. The checklist was constructed by first combining various speech act categories described in the child language literature (Bernard-Opitz, 1982; Bock & Hornsby, 1981;, Brinton & Fujiki, 1982; Coggins & Carpenter, 1984; Dale, 1980; Donahue, 1981; Dore, 1974; Ervin-Tripp, 1976; Gallagher & Prutting, 1983; garvey, 1975; Goldstein & Wickstrom, 1986; Gordon & Ervin-Tripp, 1984; Roth & Spekman, 1984). After a series of observations of four and five year old children in their classrooms, the checklist was refined to include six categories of speech acts. These categories were:

1. Commenting: talk about an object, person, or event which is directed to the listener.
2. Answering: an information-giving response to a question.
3. Affirming: a response expressing affirmation.
4. Denying: a response expressing denial.
5. Directives: utterances which attempt to direct or manipulate the behavior of another person.
6. Other: utterances which do not fall into other categories.

The categories of commenting and directives were further subdivided. A complete copy of the checklist is presented in Table 1 along with detailed definitions for each speech act category.

Procedure

The children were observed in their classroom during free play and while engaged in both large and small group activities.

They were observed for equal amounts of time in each of the three activities. Each child was observed for 80 minutes during free play, for 115 minutes during small group activities, and for 165 minutes during large group activities. Data collection was carried out for a period of approximately eight days in each classroom. In order to collect data on the children's pragmatic skills, the author entered the classroom and positioned herself close to the children so that she could overhear their conversations. In some situations, it was possible to collect data on both children simultaneously; in others, data were collected separately from each child.

The three school activities in which the above data were collected were defined as follows:

1. Free play: unstructured activity where children are free to engage in play activities of their choice.

2. Large group: highly structured activity which includes the majority of the children in the classroom. The teacher is in control of the activity.

3. Small group: moderately structured activity which involves two to four children. Children are expected to perform a designated activity and the activity is loosely monitored by the teacher.

Interrater Reliabilty

Interrater reliability was established on this instrument by having two observers rate video tapes similar to the situations in this study. Using 10 subjects, reliability coefficients ranged from .81 to .94. The mean reliability of .85. Due to the constrictions imposed by the school district in which this study was conducted, it was only possible for one researcher to be in a classroom at a given time.

Table 1

Checklist of Pragmatic Skills

Speech Act	Definition	Example
1. COMMENTING		
A. Child's action-state	talk about an object, person, or event which directed to the listener	"I have a bear book."
B. Action-state of an-	statements about the state of being, possessions, and/or activities of another person	"Darcy isn't here."
C. Action-state of an	statements about the actions or state of an object or a situation	"Milk's all gone."
2. ANSWERING	a response to an adult's or child's question	Q - "How many do you want?" A - "Two"
3. AFFIRMING	a response expressing affirmation	"Yes" "Yeah" "Okay"
4. DENYING	a response expressing denial of a proposition	"No"
5. DIRECTIVES	utterances which attempt to direct or manipulate the behavior of another person—often referred to as "requests"	
A. Imperatives	a request that is made in the form of a command	
1. Direct	a direct command	"Give me the plate."
2. Eliptical	a direct command in abbreviated form	"More milk."
3. Embedded	a command that is softened with 'could/can' or 'would/will' and is ask in the form of a question	"Could you give me a plate?"
4. Let	a command beginning with the word "let"	"Let her do it.
5. Don't	a command beginning with the word 'don't' can be full or eliptical	"Don't put that there.
6. Look	a command beginning with the word "look"	"Look what I did."
B. Declaratives	requests made in the form of a statement	
1. Want	a statement which includes the word "want"	"I want to do mine."
2. Need	a statement which includes the word "need"	"I need this one."
3. Hint	a statement which indirectly expressed a request	"All of the plates are
C. Questions	requests in the form of a question	
1. Permission	a request for permission to perform an action	"Can I watch TV?"
2. Information	a request for information	"What time is it?"
D. Calling/Attention-Seeking	a verbal attempt to gain the listener's attention for a specific purpose	"Hey, John!"
6. OTHER	utterances which don't fall into other categories	

The data were analyzed by tallying the number of speech acts performed by each of the children. The percentage of each subcategory of speech act relative to the total speech act usage was also calculated for each child. The results are presented separately for each child since the small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings. Tables 2, 3, and 4 summarize the results.

As Table 2 shows, the frequency of the basic speech acts varied among the children. First, for both the children with handicaps and the non-handicapped children, the males produced more total speech acts than did the females. Second, the non-handicapped children spoke more than did the children who were handicapped, although they were observed an equal amount of time. Third, more comments were made by the non-handicapped children than by the children who were handicapped. Only about 26% of the speech acts performed by the children who were handicapped were comments whereas commenting accounted for 58% of the non-handicapped children's speech acts. In contrast, answers constituted a higher percentage of speech acts for the children with handicaps.

Although directives accounted for a comparable percentage of the speech acts of both groups of children, differences in the types of directives used by each group are apparent in Table 3. Approximately half of the directives used by the children who were mildly retarded were imperatives. In contrast, question-type directives were more frequently used by the non-handicapped children.

Table 2

Frequency of Speech Act Usage

	Handicapped		Nonhandicapped	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Commenting	80	56	260	184
Answering	61	60	29	11
Affirming	53	18	20	8
Denying	11	6	7	4
Directives	59	55	130	76
Other	39	18	32	8
TOTAL	303	213	478	219

Table 3

Directive Use Expressed as a Percentage of Total Directive Usage

	Handicapped		Nonhandicapped	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Imperatives	50%	49%	20%	37%
Declaratives	10	2	0	9
Questions	25	20	49	47
Calling/ Attention Seeking	16	27	31	7

Table 4 displays the data on speech act usage in the three different school activities. In general, the children who were handicapped tended to do more talking in structured situations than in the free play setting. Both of the students who were handicapped talked more during the small group activities than during free play. For both, participation in large group activities elicited the fewest speech acts.

Table 4

Frequency of Speech Act Usage by School Activity

	Free Play		Large Group		Small Group	
	Handi-capped	Non-handi-capped	Handi-capped	Non-handi-capped	Handi-capped	Non-handi-capped
Commenting	27	178	78	34	31	237
Answering	11	10	68	12	42	18
Affirming	21	14	31	2	19	12
Denying	4	4	2	1	11	6
Directives	25	91	42	18	47	86
Other	26	17	23	1	8	22
TOTAL	114	309	244	68	158	381

Summary and Conclusions

In summary, there were some notable differences in the speech act usage of the two groups of children. The non-handicapped children used more speech acts which gave control and direction to their conversation. They made substantially more comments that allowed them to maintain control of conversations. The non-handicapped children also asked more questions than the children who were handicapped. The kindergarteners who were mildly retarded used less controlling speech acts and more reactive ones. The high rates of answering, affirming, and denying produced by the children with handicaps are evidence of the reactive nature of their speech acts.

A second difference between the two groups of children was observed in the types of directives they produced. Whereas the non-handicapped children used questions, the children with handicaps used imperatives. Not only were the imperatives short and grammatically simple, they were also highly repetitive. For instance, one child who was handicapped repeated the imperative "get it" three times in close succession during one observational session.

A final difference concerns how the two groups of children performed in the differenc activities. The children with handicaps talked more during the structured, large group activities. In contrast, the non-handicapped children generally talked more during the loosely-structured free play activities.

This study gives impetus for further comparisons of the

pragmatic language skills of young children with handicaps and non-handicapped children. Research investigating the role of children's conversational partners is indicated by this study. In the present study, the makeup of the two classrooms influenced the number of potential conversational partners with whom the children could interact. While there were two adults, one teacher, and one paraprofessional, in each classroom, twenty children were enrolled in the kindergarten classroom while only eight youngsters were present in the classroom for children with handicaps. The smaller number of children with handicaps likely resulted in these children having more chances to participate in large group instruction and to interact directly with the adults. Also, the social interactions of the two groups were quite varied. For example, during free play, the children who were handicapped tended to play alone and interact only when they wanted a toy that another child had. In contrast, the non-handicapped children spent much of their free play time interacting with each other. Thus, the availability of adult or child conversational partners may have influenced both the types and the incidence of the children's speech acts.

While caution should be used in interpreting the results of this study given the small sample size, it does provide a basis for conducting future research. For instance, an interesting finding from this study was the sex difference in the total number of speech acts produced. The higher frequency of speech act usage by the boys may indicate that boys are more assertive and active in school settings than are girls. Further investigations could

look further into this area as well as address other individual differences such as age, familiarity of conversational partners, handicapping condition, and ethnic background.

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